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Jill Benn, "The Library as “Student Heaven”: Re-Designing Library Spaces to Enrich the Student Experience." *Proceedings of the IATUL Conferences*. Paper 7.
<https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/iatul/2017/spaces/7>

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LIBRARY AS “STUDENT HEAVEN”: RE-DESIGNING LIBRARY SPACES TO ENRICH THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

In 2016, the ground-floor of the Reid Library at The University of Western Australia (UWA) was transformed from a ‘cold, dusty and dated’ 50-year-old space to a ‘stylish, open and social’ 750 seat collaborative learning facility. This paper will focus on how libraries are re-designing library spaces to enrich and enhance the student experience. Discussing the Reid Library Project as a case study, the paper will outline how the University Library engaged broadly and deeply with stakeholders to determine requirements, develop an innovative design befitting the Library’s central place on campus, and to generate unprecedented support for the project with one student describing it as “student heaven”.

Student engagement was central to the Project with extensive consultation undertaken to determine requirements in the form of surveys, regular meetings with student leaders, focus groups and social media engagement. Students provided constructive feedback on everything, from proposed layouts to furniture preferences, which was utilised in the planning and implementation project phases. Visitors to the Library were also engaged and able to contribute to project decision making, through such initiatives as a people’s choice vote to select the artwork for the Library entrance.

The reaction from the UWA community has been extremely positive since the space reopened with a 75% increase in library entrances. Utilisation of reference and information support has increased 40% in the new location and the space has enabled the UWA community to engage with the Library in new ways – from election polling booths, to career workshops, chess games and industry events. The teaching spaces have brought academic staff back to the Library. Most importantly, the project strengthened the Library’s relationship with students and firmly embedded the Library’s role as a leader in student experience on campus.

Introduction

Libraries all over the world are transforming. The transition from print to online collections is well advanced, and library users are, for the most part, embracing online formats as the ideal medium for many of their different information needs and behaviours. Housing collections is no longer the core purpose for library space and low use collections are being relocated off-site to free up prime campus real estate. The question of how library spaces can be transformed is prompting much innovation and future thinking amongst academic library leaders.

This paper outlines a recent project at the University of Western Australia (UWA) where an aging library space was transformed to a future oriented and innovative space to meet the needs of current and future leaders. The key factors in the success of the project were an innovative design and in-depth stakeholder engagement which are expanded on below.

Library Transformation

The incredible opportunity offered by library digital transformation has been recognised in successive New Media Corporation (NMC) Library Horizon Reports, first in 2015 as a 'wicked challenge: those that are complex to even define, much less address' (Johnson et al, 2015). In 2015, revising or building new infrastructure to support more effective, modern research practices was seen as at odds with traditional modes of thought that governed academic and research libraries (Johnson et al, 2015). A revolutionary change, based on effective strategic policy and a clear vision, would be necessary to advance positive change in the purpose and design of library spaces (Johnson et al, 2015).

In the two years since the release of the 2015 NMC report, the reimagining of library spaces has significantly advanced. Revolutionary changes have indeed taken place, and many library leaders have embraced that wicked challenge with great energy. Many have thought deeply about their practice, collaborated widely to share their vision, and some incredible library transformations are the result. This is reflected in the 2017 Library Horizon Report with the transformation of library spaces now defined as a mid-term trend, driving technology adoption and transformation in a much more rapid timeframe (Adams Becker et al, 2017).

A number of foundational concepts for library space transformation are widely accepted across the profession (Adams Becker et al, 2017):

- When discovery can happen anywhere, libraries are for finding a place to be productive;
- Libraries are hybrid environments, facilitating physical, social and digital spaces and services;
- Library space design can facilitate certain kinds of interactions and foster certain kinds of learning experiences;
- Flexible spaces that can be re-arranged and adapted by users to meet their individual needs, maximise potential;
- "Beta spaces" can be used to prototype and deploy new ventures (Dickerson, 2016).

As academic library leaders become more empowered to articulate their vision about the future of library spaces, and more and more examples of excellent projects emerge, a large body of professional knowledge has developed around library refurbishments. The UK Higher Education Learning Space Toolkit recommends all learning space design projects should reflect the following principals for best outcomes:

- Innovation and excellence;
- Adaptability;
- Manageability;
- Accessibility;
- Atmosphere;
- Sustainability;
- Compare end result with a baseline (UCISA, 2016).

These principles also form a useful set of assessment criteria by which to evaluate a refurbishment project.

Future thinking, clarity of vision and strategic rationale are essential, however translating design goals into reality within complex project constraints and practicalities is not without significant challenges (Head, 2016). The complexity of learning space projects defies the ability of any one perspective to capture all of the necessary requirements and absorb enough information to make informed decisions (UCISA, 2016). Architects, librarians and library consultants have identified common challenges in space projects as centering on communications throughout the project, both within the project team and with stakeholders (Head, 2016). Building consensus amongst all stakeholders is essential for an outcome that can be recognised as successful by the broadest audience (Head, 2016). The physical transformation of space is just one aspect of a broader transformational change that takes place around a library refurbishment, and requires political and cultural change for university leaders, stakeholders, and even student leaders (Gardner, 2013). A sustained and intensive program of collaborative efforts is recommended to bring the university community along with the project (Gardner, 2013).

Such a program should not simply inform stakeholders in a project, or even consult them on their views, but aim for a highly participatory approach, to stimulate creative thinking, help stakeholders understand each other's viewpoints, and to make better decisions for a greater outcome for end-users (UCISA, 2016). A participative approach can empower stakeholders to move through a range of engagement levels, from passive (notify) to empowered (participate in decision making), this is articulated in through an adaptation of Arnstein's (1969) Ladder of Participation (UCISA 2016) – see figure 1.

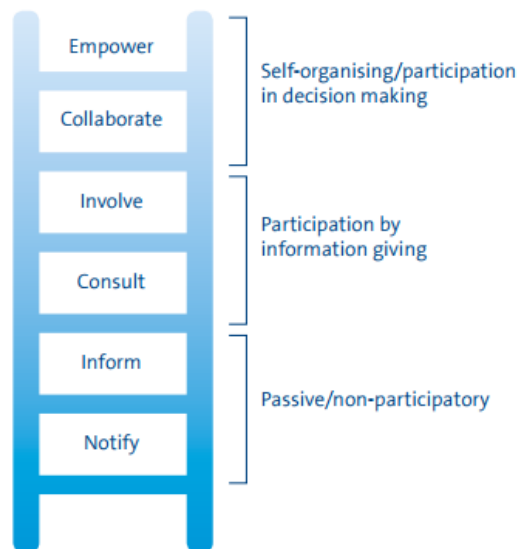


Figure 1: Adaptation of Arnstein's Ladder of Participation from UCISA (2016).

The means of engagement chosen for a particular stakeholder group can affect the level of engagement felt and experienced by those participants (UCISA, 2016). Workshops or focus groups actively solicit stakeholder views in a consultant capacity. Joint decision making, such as via voting, will involve stakeholders in the outcomes. If stakeholders are invited to do their own consultation, with their own constituents, and feed this into the project via their involvement on project steering groups, they become partners in collaborative decision making.

About the Reid Library Ground Floor Refurbishment Project

The Reid Library is an iconic building with a powerful presence at the heart of the UWA campus. The building features strong rectilinear lines with references to Brutalist architecture, and it opened 1964. It is the oldest, busiest and biggest of the six UWA libraries, ideally situated at the centre of the campus, surrounded by green space. A significant amount of the floor space had been taken up with print collections and infrastructure and furnishings had become considerably outdated.

In 2010 significant print collections were relocated out of the Library to create a 350 seat collaborative study area on the ground floor of the Library to reflect the increasing amount of group work in the UWA curriculum and demand for student group learning. But by 2014 this area was over capacity and could not cater effectively for social learning interactions. Seeing students sitting on the floor, or bringing furniture from upper floors via the lift, was a regular occurrence. Students were also working collaboratively in individual study areas on the upper floors and there were a significant number of complaints received. Comments from students indicating the issues with the space included:

It's hard to find available study spaces during 'peak' periods, and sometimes people talk in groups in silent study zones. Many desks in Reid library don't have access to power outlets for laptops.

The collaborative area in Reid gets pretty odorous, especially around study/exam periods. I don't suppose there's a lot that the uni can do about that though. Personal hygiene is hardly within the ambit of your operation.

Student feedback was a key part of the business case for a project bid to significantly improve the facilities for students. In 2015, the Library commenced a \$9 million (AUD) project to transform the space, increasing collaborative learning spaces to 750. The scope of the project featured an innovative design, including a new universally-accessible entrance and high quality café, new student focused service point, increased wireless capacity, power and data, digital signage, locker space and improved bathroom facilities. The new space opened in August 2016.

Development of an Innovative Design

The innovation in the design of the Reid Library ground floor was informed by the original briefing paper that was developed by the Library to ensure a clear vision for the refurbishment. The important aspects of this paper were:

- The challenges and opportunities of the building – significant analysis was carried out on the changing use of the library spaces and collection including details of declining circulation statistics, massive expansion of online collections, increasing entrance statistics, and changing ways in which students were using library spaces.
- A summary of the new requirements for library space based on student survey feedback – this revealed a shifting expectation of what students require with much greater importance being placed on access to collaborative spaces, power, and wireless capacity.
- A list of key design concepts based on best practice examples from other leading libraries. These included a need:
 - for innovative design
 - to link the space with the past,
 - to connect the space with the natural environment surrounding the building,
 - to support universal access,
 - to provide facilities in support of the flipped teaching model, to provide optimised support for use of technology.

When the project was approved and initiated, it was these key concepts which formed the basis for the architects to approach the design and translate the concepts into innovative elements for implementation.

Flexibility to accommodate a range of learning needs and styles was maximised in this project. The Learning Suite and The Circle are bookable spaces which support teaching, seminars, presentations, workshops, and exhibitions. They contain a range of presentation technology, dimmable lights, and movable furniture that allow the rooms to be configured in different ways. However, when they are not in use they are available to use as study space. Mounted display screens indicate the availability of the space and enable users to make bookings. This flexibility allows the Library to maximise the use of its spaces.

In designing any large study space there is always a tension between creating open spaces to convey an inviting space, while at the same time defining areas for learning. In the case of the Reid Library it is fortunate to be located between two magnificent green spaces with James Oval to the south and the Great Court to the north. The new design took the opportunity to maximise these views to allow natural light into the space to create a bright area with a close connection to the beautiful surrounds. This also supported a broader desire to allow passers-by to see the activity happening inside the building. However, this was offset by an equally important need to create defined spaces across the large floor area to accommodate a mix of social, collaborative, and individual activities. The design solution was the creation of layers of transparency in the form of vertical fins, graduated films on glass spaces, and open booths which effectively delineated spaces within the floor but still allowed vistas through the space and to the outside.

An essential aspect of place-making in buildings is inclusiveness. That is, making the space feel welcoming to help people connect with it in a positive way. In order to soften the Brutalist strong rectilinear lines on the exterior of the building, and to make the space more contemporary and inviting, a number of curved and circular elements were introduced into the space including an innovative flexible space called The Circle, curved walls and study booth structures, curved flooring designs, and rounded furniture and signage elements. These elements softened the space and made it far more welcoming. Secondly, a cafe was incorporated into the Library which integrated into the ground floor. Library users are able to access food and refreshments without having to leave their study environment. In addition, the original main entrance was via a raised walkway into the first floor which was not wheelchair compatible and inconvenient when approaching the Library via the major pedestrian artery within the University. It did not convey a sense of openness and transparency to Library users. The new design took the opportunity to create a ground level entrance which made it far more convenient for students to access the building and provided universal access for students in wheelchairs. This was also supplemented by relocating the Resource Room, a dedicated room for students with accessibility and other needs, to the ground floor.

The emphasis for the ground floor is for collaborative and social learning; a place where people can gather in various sized groups to exchange information. To facilitate this required not only physical spaces but also supporting technology. The space was upgraded with over 350 power points accessible from across the floor and comprehensive wireless access coverage. Large video monitors were introduced into the study booths and The Learning Suite which allowed users to connect and display images from their mobile devices wirelessly. Drop-down projectors which could be connected to either wirelessly or via cable were put into The Circle and The Learning Suite to allow these spaces to convert to presentation spaces.

The final innovative design element was to create a link with the past. The Library wanted to create a contemporary space, but one that recognised the heritage of libraries and collections at The University of Western Australia and beyond.. This was achieved in a number of ways including installing two state of the art exhibition cabinets to allow exhibition of some of the libraries most rare and special items and the implementation of 'The Circle' study space in the centre of the floor which is a modern interpretation on the old reading room concept such as those in the British Library and the State Library of Victoria. There was also an opportunity to reuse the old paving bricks previously located on the Reid Terrace in the building of the cafe wall which recycled these materials and preserved the past in a feature wall.

Student Engagement

Over the course of the project there was broad stakeholder engagement and this was a key factor in the success of the initiative. This included the UWA Development and Alumni Team who helped raise significant funds for the project, UWA academics who helped design the two teaching spaces, but most importantly, students, who were regarded as co-designers, co-decision makers and co-promoters.

Student engagement was central and a key feature of the project with extensive consultation undertaken to determine requirements in the form of surveys, regular meetings with student

leaders, focus groups and social media engagement. The approach adopted was one of empowerment as illustrated above in the Arnstein Ladder of Participation (UCISA 2016).

Some key examples of student engagement:

- As decisions were made about furniture, samples were made available to students to try, and they were invited to vote for their preferred options.
- The circular design in the centre of the floor had originally been named “The Eye” by the Architects with the inner 60 seat teaching/event/exhibition space named “The Pupil”. Feedback from students in the focus groups held was that the eye had connotations of being watched, and they did not like it, suggesting it be named “The Circle”.
- The Library held a competition to install a large three metre by eight metre mural at the Library’s entrance. While there was nervousness about letting students select the design, this was a key way of engaging students. Shortly after opening there was an artist in residence who painted the mural while the Library was open.
- The Indigenous Studies area on campus provided feedback that the Library was not particularly welcoming for Indigenous groups. As a result, the Library engaged with the Indigenous student group on campus to name one of the key elements, the café, to make the Library more welcoming. The café is named Quobba Gnarning which translates as “good food”.

In all of these instances, the Library acted on and responded proactively to student feedback, with students visibly seeing that their feedback, ideas and suggestions were acted upon.

Throughout the project social media was used successfully to communicate with students. As the majority of the works were undertaken with the other three floors in operation, social media provided an effective strategy to notify students about closures and noisy works, to obtain feedback from students, and generate interest in the project. Time lapse photography and a lot of images were used to communicate project progress which generated a lot of publicity from students and the UWA community more broadly.

Outcomes, Impact and Future Directions

Stakeholder engagement and support for the project throughout the planning and construction phases was enthusiastic, but then the reaction from the UWA community upon the re-opening of the refurbished space surpassed all expectations. Visits to the Library have increased by 78% and students’ first impressions of the space were overwhelmingly positive with responses to a survey in the first month referring to the space as ‘modern, intelligent + inspires me to study at library’ and ‘stylish, open, social environment, STUDENT HEAVEN’.

As a result of the refurbishment, students who had found alternative study spaces due to the ageing facilities in the Reid Library pre-refurbishment returned in significant numbers. This was evidenced by social media comments left against posts about the refurbishment such as ‘probably would actually use the library to study if it looked like this’ and ‘might have to visit the library for the second time in two years!’. The Student Guild commented on this trend by explaining that ‘the significant improvements to facilities, technology and services offered to students has had an extremely positive impact amongst the UWA student body and is now attracting more and more students to study on campus.’

Students also started using the space for club and student group activities such as UWA Chess Club gatherings and UWA Hacky Hour. Other areas of the University have recognised the advantages of holding events and workshops in the Circle due to its location as a focal point on the ground floor and the high traffic through the space. As a result, the Careers Centre has held weekly resume workshops and the Astrofest Astrophotography Exhibition was held in the space during UWA Research Week in September 2016. In early 2017, the Australian Electoral Commission set up an early polling station on the ground floor to encourage students, and the broader UWA community, to vote in the WA State General Election.

Classes and workshops and University-wide staff training sessions have been held in the new classroom space on the ground floor, seeing a return of academic staff to the physical library, the majority of which utilise the Library’s services online. Feedback has been very positive about this space with one unit coordinator saying ‘thanks to the new learning suite at the Reid

which I was allowed to use for my workshop, the venue effect has been contributing greatly to the learning'. Likewise, the venue has also played a part in the success of the WRITESmart drop in service which offers advice and feedback on assignments, study, research and referencing. In its new location on the ground floor, the service has experienced an increase in use of 33%.

Despite students and staff being the main users of the new space, it has also become a 'destination' on campus, which the University is utilising to engage with important members of the UWA community such as alumni. An example of this was in February 2017 when the UWA Philosophers Café Series with prominent authors took place in The Circle in connection with the Perth Writers Festival.

The Reid Library is now a highlight of tours of campus for prospective students, staff and visiting dignitaries as it is an example of the University's high quality teaching and learning facilities. It has also featured in photo shoots for student recruitment campaigns and just two weeks after it re-opened, 4,000 prospective students, their families and other community members visited the space as part of the University's annual Open Day. This was a 124% increase compared to previous years and demonstrates how the Library can play a significant role in student recruitment and retention and the University's reputation. A common theme on social media when the space re-opened was from individuals, many of whom appeared to be UWA alumni, who commented that they suddenly felt compelled to enrol in postgraduate studies purely in response to the photographs.

The refurbishment project has also been nominated for a number of awards, receiving an honourable mention in the UWA Innovation Champion Awards, a finalist in the Australian Library Design Awards, and winning an Australian Market Shaw Contract Design Award. The Reid Library was also one of three libraries worldwide featured in images in the 2017 Horizon Report. Based on the success of the Project, further refurbishments are occurring in the UWA Medical and Law Libraries and it is likely that further works will be undertaken in the Reid Library.

Conclusion

The success of the refurbishment of the Reid Library ground floor, can be measured through student usage and satisfaction, however some of the more unexpected methods of measuring success outlined above included the way in which perceptions of the Library have changed and the Library's impact on University reputation, award nominations, and the funding of more Library refurbishment projects. In the future this may be how library value is measured; well beyond quantitative measures such as the number of collections on library shelves, the number of online titles, and the number of library visits.

Sustained user engagement of an empowered nature is critical to the success of any refurbishment project. This is encapsulated in this statement from the UWA Student Guild:

Throughout the design and implementation of this project, students were consulted at all levels and given ample opportunity to provide input and insight. Students were able to see that their feedback was being heard and were constantly kept in the loop throughout all phases of the project. The open communication and thorough student involvement were driving factors to the successful delivery of this new space.

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